

# Ten Doubts about Pure Land

by

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## Question 1

*Great Compassion is the life calling of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Thus, those who have developed the Bodhi Mind, wishing to rescue and ferry other sentient beings across, should simply vow to be reborn in the Triple Realm, among the five turbidities and the three evil paths. Why should we abandon sentient beings to lead a selfish life of tranquility? Is this not a lack of compassion, a preoccupation with egoistic needs, contrary to the path of enlightenment?*

## Answer

There are two types of Bodhisattvas. The first type are those who have followed the Bodhisattva path for a long time and attained the Tolerance of Non-Birth (insight into the non-origination of phenomena). This reproach applies to them.

The second type are Bodhisattvas who have not attained the Tolerance of Non-Birth, as well as ordinary beings who have just developed the Bodhi Mind. If they aspire to perfect that Tolerance and enter the evil life of the Triple Realm to save sentient beings, they should remain in constant proximity to the Buddhas. As stated in the Perfection of Wisdom Treatise:

“It is unwise for human beings who are still bound by all kinds of afflictions, even if they possess a great compassionate mind, to seek a premature rebirth in this evil realm to rescue sentient beings.

“Why is this so? It is because in this evil, defiled world, afflictions are powerful and widespread. Those who lack the power of Tolerance (of Non-Birth) are bound to be swayed by the external circumstances. They then become slaves to form and sound, fame and fortune, with the resulting karma of greed, anger and delusion. Once this occurs, they cannot even save themselves, much less others!

“If, for example, they are born in the human realm, in this evil environment full of non-believers and externalists, it is difficult to encounter genuine teachers. Therefore, it is not easy to hear the Buddhadharma nor to achieve the goals of the sages.

“Of those who planted the seeds of generosity, morality and blessings in previous lives and are thus now enjoying power and fame, how many are not infatuated with a life of wealth and honor, wallowing in endless greed and lust?

“Therefore, even when they are counselled by enlightened teachers, they do not believe them nor act accordingly. Moreover, to satisfy their passions, they take advantage of their existing power and influence, creating a great deal of bad karma. Thus, when their present life comes to an end, they descend upon the three evil paths for countless eons. After that, they are reborn as humans of low social and economic status. If they do not then meet good spiritual advisors, they will continue to be deluded, creating more bad karma and descending once again into the lower realms. From time immemorial, sentient beings caught in the cycle of Birth and Death have been in this predicament. This is called the ‘Difficult Path of Practice’.”

The Vimalakirti Sutra also states,

“If you cannot even cure your own illness, how can you cure the illness of others?”

The Perfection of Wisdom Treatise further states:

“Take the case of two persons, each of whom watches a relative drowning in the river. The first person, acting on impulse, hastily jumps into the water. However, because he lacks the necessary skills, in the end, both of them drown. The second person, more intelligent and resourceful, hurries off to fetch a boat and sails to the rescue. Thus, both persons escape drowning.

“Newly aspiring Bodhisattvas are like the first individual who still lacks the power of Tolerance (of Non-Rebirth) and cannot save sentient beings. Only those Bodhisattvas who remain close to the Buddhas and attain that Tolerance can substitute for the Buddhas and ferry countless sentient beings across, just like the person who has the boat.”

The Perfection of Wisdom Treatise goes on to state:

“This is not unlike a young child who should not leave his mother, lest he fall into a well, drown in the river or die of starvation; or a young bird whose wings are not fully developed. It must bide its time, hopping from branch to branch, until it can fly afar, leisurely and unimpeded.

“Ordinary persons who lack the Tolerance of Non-Birth should limit themselves to Buddha Recitation, to achieve one-pointedness of Mind. Once that goal is reached, at the time of death, they will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land. Having seen Amitabha Buddha and reached the Tolerance of Non-Birth, they can steer the boat of that Tolerance into the sea of Birth and Death, to ferry sentient beings across and accomplish countless Buddha deeds at will.”

For these reasons, compassionate practitioners who wish to teach and convert sentient beings in hell, or enter the sea of Birth and Death, should bear in mind the causes and conditions for rebirth in the Pure Land. This is referred to as the ‘Easy Path of Practice’ in the Commentary on the Ten Stages of the Bodhisattvas.



## Question 2

*All phenomena are by nature empty, always unborn (Non-Birth), equal and still. Are we not going against this truth when we abandon this world, seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss? The (Vimalakirti) Sutra teaches that “to be reborn in the Pure Land, you should first purify your own Mind; only when the Mind is pure, will the Buddha lands be pure.” Are not Pure Land followers going against this truth?*

## Answer

This question involves two principles and can be answered on two levels.

(A) On the level of generality, if you think that seeking rebirth in the Pure Land means “leaving here and seeking there”, and is therefore incompatible with the Truth of Equal Thusness, are you not committing the same mistake by grasping at this Saha World and not seeking rebirth in the Pure Land, i.e., “leaving there and grasping here”? If, on the other hand, you say, “I am neither seeking rebirth there, nor do I wish to remain here,” you fall into the error of nihilism.

The Diamond Sutra states in this connection:

“Subhuti, ... do not have such a thought. Why? Because one who develops the Supreme Enlightened Mind does not advocate the (total) annihilation (of the marks of the dharmas.)” (Bilingual Buddhist Series, Vol. 1. Taipei: Buddhist Cultural Service, 1962, p. 130.)

(B) On the level of Specifics, since you have brought up the truth of Non-Birth and the Pure Mind, I would like to give the following explanation.

Non-Birth is precisely the truth of No-Birth and No-Death. No-Birth means that all dharmas are false aggregates, born of causes and conditions, with no Self-Nature. Therefore, they have no real “birth nature” or “time of birth”. Upon analysis, they do not really come from anywhere. Therefore, they are said to have No-Birth.

No-Death means that, since phenomena have no Self-Nature, when they are extinguished, they cannot be considered dead. Because they have no real place to return to, they are said to be not extinct (No-Death).

For this reason, the truth of Non-Birth (or No-Birth No-Death) cannot exist outside of ordinary phenomena, which are subject to birth and death. Therefore, Non-Birth does not mean not seeking rebirth in the Pure Land.

The Treatise on the Middle Way states:

“Dharmas (phenomena) are born of causes and conditions. I say they are thus empty. They are also called false and fictitious, and that is also the truth of the Middle Way.”

It also states:

“Dharmas are neither born spontaneously nor do they arise from others. They are born neither together with nor apart from causes and conditions. They are therefore said to have Non-Birth.”

The Vimalakirti Sutra states:

“Although he knows that Buddha Lands / Are void like living beings / He goes on practicing the Pure Land (Dharma) / to teach and convert men.” (Charles Luk, The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra, p. 88.)

It also states:

“We can build mansions at will on empty land, but it is impossible to build in the middle of empty space.”

When the Buddhas preach, they usually rely on the Two Truths (ultimate and conventional). They do not destroy the fictitious, provisional identities of phenomena while revealing their true characteristics.

That is why the wise, while earnestly striving for rebirth in the Pure Land, also understand that the nature of rebirth is intrinsically empty. This is true Non-Birth, and also the meaning of “only when the Mind is pure, will the Buddha Lands be pure”.

The dull and ignorant, on the other hand, are caught up in the concept of birth. Upon hearing the term “Birth”, they understand it as actual birth; hearing of “Non-Birth”, they (cling to its literal meaning) and think that there is no rebirth anywhere. Little do they realize that “Birth is precisely Non-Birth, and Non-Birth does not hinder Birth.”

Because they do not understand this principle, they provoke arguments, slandering and deprecating those who seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. What a great mistake! They are guilty of vilifying the Dharma and belong to the ranks of deluded externalists (non-Buddhists).



### Question 3

*All the Pure Lands of the Buddhas of the ten directions have equal qualities and virtues. Their Dharma Nature is also the same. Therefore, the practitioner should meditate on all the virtues of the Buddhas and seek rebirth in the various Pure Lands of the ten directions. Why should he specifically seek rebirth in the Pure Land of one particular Buddha (i.e., Amitabha)? Is this not contrary to the truth of “equally in seeking rebirth”?*

### Answer

All the Pure Lands of the Buddhas are, in truth, equal. Nevertheless, since the majority of sentient beings in our world generally have dull faculties and defiled, scattered minds, it will be difficult for them to achieve samadhi, unless they concentrate exclusively on one realm.

The practice of constantly focussing on Amitabha Buddha is the “Single Mark Samadhi”. Because the Mind is exclusively devoted to one thing, the practitioner achieves rebirth in the Pure Land. In the Sutra Rebirth According to One’s Vows, Buddha Sakyamuni was asked by a Bodhisattva, “Honored One! There are Pure Lands in all ten directions. Why do you especially extol the Western Pure Land and urge sentient beings to focus continuously on Amitabha Buddha, seeking rebirth in His Land?”

The Buddha replied, “Sentient beings in this Saha World generally have polluted, scattered minds. Therefore, I only extol one Pure Land in the West, focussing their Minds on a single realm. If they meditate on all Buddhas, the scope of attention will be too

broad, their Minds will be lost and scattered and they will find samadhi difficult to attain. Thus, they will fail to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.

“Furthermore, seeking the virtues of one Buddha is the same as seeking the virtues of all Buddhas – as all Buddhas have one common Dharma Nature. That is why to focus on Amitabha Buddha is to focus on all Buddhas, to be born in the Western Pure Land is to be born in all Pure Lands.”

Thus, the Avatamsaka Sutra states:

“The bodies of all the Buddhas / are the body of any one Buddha. / They have the same Mind and the same wisdom. / They are also equal in power and fearlessness.”

The Avatamsaka Sutra further states:

“It is like the full moon, round and bright, its image reflected in all rivers and ponds. Although the reflection is everywhere, there is but a single moon. So it is with ... (the Buddhas). Although they appear in all realms, their bodies are non-dual.”

In summary, based on these examples, the wise will understand the truth that “one is all, all is one”. When this truth is grasped, concentrating on one Buddha is precisely concentrating on all Buddhas.



## Question 4

*There are many Buddhas and Pure Lands in all the ten directions. Even if sentient beings in this world have polluted, scattered minds and dispositions, so that focussing on many Buddhas makes it difficult for them to attain samadhi, why should they not recite the name of any Buddha, as they wish, and seek rebirth in any Pure Land, in accordance with their vows? Why concentrate specifically on Amitabha Buddha and seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss?*

## Answer

Common people lacking in wisdom should follow the teaching of the Buddha rather than acting arbitrarily on their own. This is why, from time immemorial, Pure Land practitioners have all diligently recited Amitabha Buddha’s name.

What does it mean to follow the Buddha’s teaching?

During his entire preaching career, Buddha Sakyamuni constantly enjoined sentient beings to focus on Amitabha Buddha and seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. This is mentioned in such sutras as the Longer Amitabha Sutra, the Meditation Sutra, the Amitabha Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra ... In numerous sutras, the

Buddha constantly urged us to seek rebirth in the Western Land. This is not only true of the sutras; in their commentaries, the Bodhisattvas and Patriarchs unanimously advise us to seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Moreover, Amitabha Buddha possesses the power of His forty-eight compassionate vows to rescue sentient beings. The Meditation Sutra states:

“Amitabha Buddha possesses 84,000 signs of perfection, each sign has 84,000 minor marks of excellence and from each minor mark 84,000 rays of light shine forth, illuminating the entire Dharma Realm (cosmos) to gather in, without exception, all sentient beings who practice Buddha Recitation. If any sentient being recites His name, there will be correspondence between cause and response, and he will surely be reborn.”

Furthermore, the Amitabha Sutra, the Longer Amitabha Sutra, etc., teach that when Sakyamuni Buddha preached these sutras, the Buddhas of the ten directions, numerous as the grains of sand in the River Ganges, all “extended their tongues to cover the entire universe”, bearing witness to the truth that any sentient being who recites Amitabha Buddha’s name shall be assured of rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, thanks to the great, compassionate vow-power of the Buddha.

We should know that Amitabha Buddha has great affinities (causes and conditions) with this world. As the Longer Amitabha Sutra states:

“In the Dharma-Ending Age, when all other sutras have disappeared, only this sutra will remain for another hundred years to rescue sentient beings and lead them to the Western Pure Land.”

This demonstrates that Amitabha Buddha has strong affinities with sentient beings in this defiled world.

Although one or two sutras have, in a general way, urged rebirth in other Pure Lands, this cannot be compared to the fact that numerous sutras and commentaries have earnestly pointed out to the Land of Ultimate Bliss as the focus of rebirth.



## Question 5

*Ordinary people are entirely enmeshed in heavy evil karma and are full of all kinds of afflictions. Even though they may have some virtues as a result of cultivation, they find it difficult to sever even a fraction of their defilements and hindrances. The Land of Ultimate Bliss, on the other hand, is extremely purely adorned, transcending the Triple Realm. How can such depraved common mortals hope to be reborn there?*

## Answer

There are two conditions for rebirth: “self-power” and “other-power”. As far as self-power is concerned, while the ordinary beings of this world, totally bound (by their attachments and afflictions), may have some level of cultivation, in reality, they still cannot be reborn in the Pure Land nor deserve to reside there.

The Peace and Bliss Collection states:

“Those who first develop the Bodhi Mind – starting from the level of completely fettered ordinary beings ignorant of the Three Treasures and the Law of Cause and Effect – should base themselves initially on faith. Next, when they have embarked upon the Bodhi path, the precepts should serve as their foundation. If these ordinary beings accept the Bodhisattva precepts and continue to uphold them unfailingly and without interruption for three kalpas, they will reach the First Abode of Bodhisattvahood.

“If they pursue their cultivation in this manner through ... the Ten Paramitas as well as countless vows and practices, one after another without interruption, at the end of ten thousand kalpas they will reach the Sixth Abode of Bodhisattvahood. Should they continue still further, they will reach the Seventh Abode (Non-Retrogression). They will then have entered the stage of the ‘Seed of Buddhahood’, (i.e., they are assured of eventual Buddhahood). However, even then, they still cannot achieve rebirth in the Pure Land” – that is, if they rely on self-power alone.

With regard to “other power”, if anyone believes in the power of Amitabha Buddha’s compassionate vow to rescue sentient beings and then develops the Bodhi Mind, cultivate the Buddha Remembrance (Recitation) Samadhi, grows weary of his temporal, impure body in the Triple Realm, practices charity, upholds the precepts and performs other meritorious deeds – dedicating all the merits and virtues to rebirth in the Western Land – his aspirations and the Buddha’s response will be accord. Relying thus on the Buddha’s power, he will immediately achieve rebirth.

Thus, it is stated in the Commentary on the Ten Stages of Buddhahood:

“There are two paths of cultivation, the Difficult Path and the Easy Path. The Difficult Path refers to the practices of sentient beings in the world of the five turbidities, who, through countless Buddha eras, aspire to reach the stage of Non-Retrogression. The difficulties are truly countless, as numerous as specks of dust or grains of sand, too numerous to imagine. I will summarize the five major ones below:

- a) Externalists are legion, creating confusion with respect to the Bodhisattva Dharma;
- b) Evil beings destroy the practitioner’s good, wholesome virtues;
- c) Worldly merits and blessings can easily lead the practitioner astray, so that he ceases to engage in virtuous practices;
- d) It is easy to stray onto the Arhat’s path of self-benefit, which obstructs the Mind of great compassion;



- e) Relying exclusively on self-power, without the aid of the Buddha's power, makes cultivation very difficult and arduous. It is not unlike the case of a feeble, handicapped person, walking alone, who can only go so far each day regardless of how much effort he expends.

“The Easy Path of cultivation means that, if sentient beings in this world believe in the Buddha's words, practice Buddha Recitation and vow to be reborn in the Pure Land, they are assisted by the Buddha's vow-power and assured of rebirth. This is analagous to a person who floats downstream in a boat; although the distance may be many thousands of miles, his destination will be reached in no time. Similarly, a common being, relying on the power of a ‘universal monarch’ (a kind of deity), can traverse the ‘four great universes’ in a day and a night – this is not due to his own power, but, rather, to the power of the monarch.”

Some people, reasoning according to “noumenon” (principle), may say that common beings, being “conditioned”, cannot be reborn in the Pure Land or see the Buddha's body.

The answer is that the virtues of Buddha Recitation are “unconditioned” good roots. Ordinary, impure persons who develop the Bodhi Mind, seek rebirth and constantly practice Buddha Recitation can subdue and destroy afflictions, achieve rebirth and, depending on their level of cultivation, obtain vision of the their level of the rudimentary aspects of the Buddha (the thirty-two marks of greatness, for example). Bodhisattvas, naturally, can achieve rebirth and see the subtle, loftier aspects of the Buddha (i.e., the Dharma body). There can be no doubt about this.

Thus, the Avatamsaka Sutra states:

“All the various Buddha Lands are equally purely adorned. Because the karmic practices of sentient beings differ, their perceptions of these Lands are different.”

This is the meaning of what was said earlier.



## Question 6

*Although sentient beings, completely enmeshed in afflictions and evil views, may achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, they are bound to develop afflictions and perverse views constantly. Under these circumstances, how can they be said to have “transcended the Triple Realm and attained the stage of Non-Retrogression”?*

## Answer

Those who are reborn in the Pure Land, though they may be ordinary beings totally enmeshed in evil karma, cannot ever develop afflictions or perverse views, nor can they fail to achieve non-retrogression. This is due to five factors:

- a) The power of the Buddha's great, compassionate vow embraces and protects them;
- b) The Buddha's light (wisdom) always shines upon them and, therefore, the Bodhi Mind of these superior persons will always progress;
- c) In the Western Pure Land, the birds, water, forests, trees, wind and music all preach the Dharma of "suffering, emptiness, impermanence and no-self". Upon hearing this, practitioners begin to focus on the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha;
- d) Those who are reborn in the Pure Land have the highest level Bodhisattvas as their companions and are free from all obstacles, calamities and evil conditions. Moreover there are no externalists or evil demons, so their Minds are always calm and still;
- e) Once they are reborn in the Pure Land, their life span is inexhaustible, equal to that of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Thus, they can peacefully cultivate for countless eons.

As a result of these five causes and conditions, sentient beings who are reborn in the Pure Land will certainly achieve non-retrogression and will never develop afflictions or perverse views. Sentient beings in this world of the five turbidities, on the other hand, have short life spans and face a host of perverse conditions and obstructions. Therefore, they have great difficulty achieving non-retrogression. This truth is self-evident and beyond doubt.



## Question 7

*The Bodhisattva Maitreya is a One-Life Bodhisattva who is now in the Tushita Heaven. He will succeed Buddha Sakyamuni and become a Buddha in the future. I venture to think that we should cultivate the loftier aspects of the Ten Virtues and seek to be reborn in the Tushita Heaven, to see Him in person. When the time comes for Him to descend to earth and become a Buddha, we will follow Him and certainly achieve Sagehood in the course of His three teaching assemblies. Therefore, where is the need to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land?*

## Answer

Seeking rebirth in the Tushita Heaven could be considered equivalent to hearing the Dharma and seeing the Buddha. It seems very similar to seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land. However, upon close scrutiny, there are many great differences between the two. Let us cite two points for the sake of discussion.

A) Even though we may cultivate the Ten Virtues, it is not certain that we will achieve rebirth in the Tushita Heaven. As stated in the sutras:

“The practitioner must cultivate the various samadhi and enter deeply into right concentration to obtain rebirth in the Inner Court of the Tushita Heaven.”

From that we can deduce that the Bodhisattva Maitreya lacks the expedient of “welcoming and escorting”. This cannot be compared to the power of Amitabha Buddha’s Original Vow and His power of light, which can gather in and rescue all sentient beings who concentrate in Him.

Moreover, when Buddha Sakyamuni explained the meaning of the “welcoming and escorting” expedient in his exposition of the nine grades of rebirth, he earnestly enjoined sentient beings to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This expedient is very simple. The practitioner need only recite the name of Amitabha and, thanks to the congruence of sentiment and response, he will immediately achieve rebirth. This is analogous to an enlistment campaign: those who wish to join the army may do so immediately, as their desire parallels the goal of the state.

B) Secondly, the Tushita Heaven is, after all, still within the Realm of Desire (to which our Saha World also belongs). Therefore, those who retrogress are legion. In that Heaven, the birds, rivers, forests, trees, wind ... do not preach the Dharma and thus cannot help sentient beings destroy afflictions, focus on the Triple Jewel nor develop the Bodhi Mind. Moreover, in that realm, there are goddesses who kindle the five desires in the Minds of celestial beings, to the point where few of them escape distraction and infatuation.

How can this be compared to the Western Pure Land, where the trees and birds proclaim the wonderful Dharma and the wind sings enlightenment, destroying the afflictions of sentient beings and reinforcing the Bodhi Mind of practitioners? Moreover, in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha, there are no seductive beings or beings concerned with self-enlightenment alone. There are only pure vessels of the Mahayana way. Therefore, afflictions and evil karma cannot arise. Under these circumstances, how can cultivators fail to achieve the stage of non-retrogression swiftly? We have only drawn a few points of comparison, yet the differences between the Pure Land and the Tushita Heaven are already obvious. How can there be any further doubt or hesitation?

Moreover, seeing the Bodhisattva Maitreya and achieving the fruits of Arhatship is not necessarily a sure thing! During the lifetime of Buddha Sakyamuni, there were many who saw the Buddha but did not achieve Sagehood. In the future, when the Bodhisattva Maitreya appears in the world, the same will be true: countless sentient beings will see Him and listen to the Dharma but not attain Arhatship. Such is not the case in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha: to be reborn there is to be assured of attaining the Tolerance of Non-Birth, with no possible retrogression to the Triple World nor bondage to the karma of Birth and Death.

In the Accounts of the Western Land, (i.e., India), there is the story of three Bodhisattvas, Asanga, Vasubandhu and Simhabhadra, all of whom practiced meditation, determined to seek rebirth in the Tushita Heaven. They all vowed that if the first one of them to die were reborn in the Inner Court of the Tushita Heaven and saw the Bodhisattva Maitreya, he would return and inform the others. Simhabhadra died first, but a long time elapsed and he still had not returned. Later, when Vasubandhu was nearing death, Asanga said to him, “After paying your respects to Maitreya, come back and let me know right away.” Vasubandhu died, but did not return for three years. Asanga inquired, “Why did it take you so long?” Vasubandhu answered, “After paying my respects to the Bodhisattva Maitreya, listening to His sermon and exhortations, and respectfully circumambulating Him three

times, I came back immediately. I could not return sooner because a day and night in the Tushita Heaven is equivalent to four hundred years on earth.”

Asanga then asked, “Where is Simhabhadra now?” Vasubandhu replied, “He has strayed into the Outer Court of the Tushita Heaven, and is now entangled in the five pleasures. From the time of his death to now, he has been unable to see Maitreya.”

We can deduce from this anecdote that even lesser Bodhisattvas who are reborn in the Tushita Heaven are subject to delusion, not to mention common mortals. Therefore, practitioners who wish to be assured of non-retrogression should seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land rather than the Tushita Heaven.



## Question 8

*From time immemorial, sentient beings have committed countless transgressions. Moreover, in this life, from infancy to old age, they create additional evil karma because they do not have the opportunity to encounter good spiritual advisors. Under these circumstances, how can it be said that “At the time of death, they will achieve rebirth with only ten perfect utterances of the Buddha’s name”? Furthermore, how do you satisfactorily explain the teaching that such practitioners “transcend the binding karma of the Triple Realm”?*

## Answer

In truth, it is difficult to assess the number or the strength of the good and evil karmic seeds that sentient beings have created from time immemorial. However, those who, at the time of death, encounter a good spiritual advisor and accomplish ten utterances, must have created good karma in the past. Otherwise, they could not even meet a good spiritual advisor, let alone accomplish ten pure recitations!

Now, lest you think that the evil karma from beginningless time is heavy while ten utterances at the time of death are light, I shall cite three reasons why rebirth in the Pure Land does not necessarily depend on the weight of bad karma, the amount of practice or the duration of cultivation. The three reasons concern a) the Mind, b) the conditions and c) the issue of certainty.

### a) Mind

The transgressions committed by sentient beings spring from deluded, perverse thought. Recitation of the Buddha’s name, on the other hand, arises from right thought, that is, hearing of Amitabha Buddha’s name and true virtues. One is false and the other is true. There is no possible comparison between them!

This is similar to a house which has been boarded up for ten thousand years. If the windows are suddenly opened to let the sunlight in, all darkness immediately dissipates. However long the period of darkness may have been, how can it fail to disappear? It is likewise for sentient beings who have committed transgressions for many eons but achieve

rebirth at the time of death through ten pure recitations.

#### b) Conditions

Transgressions grow out of dark, inverted thoughts, combined with illusory circumstances and environments. Buddha Recitation, on the contrary, arises from hearing of Amitabha Buddha's name and pure virtues, combined with the aspiration for enlightenment. One is false and the other is true. There is no possible comparison between them!

This is analagous to a person struck by a poisoned arrow. The arrow has penetrated deep inside his body and the poison is strong, deeply wounding his flesh and bones. Still, if at that moment he hears the "celestial drum", the arrow will "shoot out" of his flesh by itself and the poison will be neutralized. The arrow has not penetrated so deep nor is the poison so strong that he cannot recover! It is likewise for sentient beings who have committed transgressions for many eons but achieve rebirth at the time of death through ten pure recitations.

#### c) Certainty of Salvation

When sentient beings commit transgressions, they do so enter from the "intervening mental state" or "post-mental state". These two mental states do not apply, however, at the time of death: there is only one extremely powerful, utterly intense thought of recitation, letting go of everything before dying. Therefore, rebirth is achieved.

This is analogous to a very large, strong cable which even thousands of people cannot break. Yet, a child wielding a "celestial sword" can cut it in several pieces without difficulty. It is also similar to a huge pile of wood, accumulated for thousands of years, which, when set on fire by a small flame, is completely consumed within a short time. The same is true of someone who has practiced the Ten Virtues throughout his life, seeking rebirth in the Heavens. If, at the time of death, he develops an intense perverse thought, he will immediately descend, instead, into the Avici (Never-Ending) Hell.

Although bad karma is intrinsically false and illusory, the overpowering strength of Mind and thought can still upset a lifetime of good karma and cause the individual to descend onto evil paths. How, then, can Buddha Recitation, which is true, wholesome karma, generated intensely at the time of death, fail to upset his bad karma, even though that karma may have been accumulated from time immemorial? Therefore, someone who has committed transgressions for many eons, but, at the time of death accomplishes ten recitations with a totally earnest Mind, will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land. Not to achieve rebirth under such circumstances would indeed be inconceivable!

The sutras teach:

"A single utterly sincere recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name obliterates the grave wrongdoings of eight million eons of Birth and Death."

This is possible because the practitioner recites the Buddha's name with a Mind of utmost sincerity and therefore can annihilate evil karma. As long as, on his deathbed, he utters the Buddha's name in such a frame of Mind, he will be assured of rebirth. There can be no further doubt about it!

Traditionally, it has been explained that the dying person's ability to recite ten utterances is due entirely to previous good karma. This explanation is not, however, correct.

Why is this so? It is because, as a commentary states, “if it were merely a question of previous karma, only the vow for rebirth would be necessary, and there would be no place at all for practice ...”

The practitioner who, on his deathbed, accomplishes ten recitations, is able to do so because of his previous good conditions (enabling him to meet a good spiritual advisor) and because of his own wholehearted recitation. To attribute rebirth in such circumstances exclusively to previous good karma would be a great mistake! I hope that practitioners will ponder this truth deeply, develop a firm Mind, and not be led astray by erroneous views.



## Question 9

*The Western Pure Land is ten billion Buddha Lands away from here. Common, ordinary people are weak and frail. How can they reach it?*

## Answer

The Western Pure Land is described as being ten billion Buddha Lands away from here only with respect to the limited concepts of ordinary people with eyes of flesh and blood, mired in birth and death.

For those who have attained the pure karma of rebirth in the Pure Land, the Mind in samadhi at the time of death is precisely the Mind reborn in the Pure Land. As soon as the thought (of rebirth) arises, rebirth is achieved. Thus, the Meditation Sutra states that “the Land of Amitabha Buddha is not far from here!” Moreover, the power of karma is inconceivable. In the space of one thought, rebirth in the Pure Land is achieved. There is no need to worry about distance.

This is analogous to a person asleep and dreaming. Although his body is on the bed, his Mind is travelling all over, to all worlds, as though he were awake. Rebirth in the Pure Land is, generally speaking, similar to this example.



## Question 10

*I have now resolved to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. However, I do not know which practices to cultivate, nor what the seeds of rebirth in the Western Pure Land are. Moreover, ordinary people all have families and have not rid themselves of lust and attachment. This being the case, can they achieve rebirth?*

## Answer

If a cultivator wishes to be assured of rebirth, he should perfect two practices: the practice of “disgust” (at the five desires) and the practice of “joyfulness in vows”.

A) The practice of “disgust” refers to the fact that common people have been bound by the five desires from time immemorial. Thus, they wander along the six paths, enduring untold suffering! In that quagmire, unless they become disgusted with the five desires, how can they escape the cycle of birth and death?

Therefore, the Pure Land cultivator should constantly visualize this body as a mass of flesh and bones, blood and pus, a skinbag containing phlegm, pus, urine, feces and other foul-smelling substances. The Parinirvana Sutra states:

“This fortress of a body – only evil, deluded demons could tolerate living in it. Who with any wisdom would ever cling to or to delight in such a skinbag!”

Another scriptures states:

“This body is the confluence of all kinds of suffering; it is a jail, a prison, a mass of ulcers; everything is impure. In truth, it is not worth clinging to – even the celestial bodies of deities are no different.”

Therefore, whether walking, standing, sitting or reclining, whether asleep or awake, cultivators should always visualize this body as nothing but a source of suffering, without any pleasure, and develop a sense of disgust ... (thus gradually becoming free from lustful thoughts).

Moreover, the cultivator should also engage in the Seven Types of Meditation on Impurity (e.g., as a fetus, in the impure, dirty area of the womb, drinking the mother’s blood, emerging from the womb with pus and blood gushing forth and foul odors in profusion ... after death, the body swelling up and rotting away, with flesh and bones in disarray ...).

Our own bodies being thus, the bodies of others are likewise. If we constantly meditate on these seven impurities, we will develop disgust toward those male and female forms which ordinary people judge handsome and beautiful. The flames of lust will thus gradually diminish.

If, in addition, we can practice the meditations on the Nine Kinds Of Foulness, (e.g. meditation on the fresh corpse, the bloated corpse, the bleeding and oozing corpse, the skeleton ... and other progressive stages of decay of the human body after death), so much the better.

We should also vow to be forever free from rebirth in a deluded, impure male or female body in the Triple Realm, eating a hodgepodge of foods, and aspiring instead to be endowed with a Pure Land Dharma Nature body.

This constitutes a general discussion of the practice of disgust.

B) There are, in general, two aspects to making the joyous vow of “rescuing oneself and others”.

1) The practitioner should clearly realize the goal of rebirth – which is to seek escape from suffering for himself and all sentient beings. He should think thus: “My own strength is limited, I am still bound by karma; moreover, in this evil, defiled life, the circumstances and conditions leading to afflictions are overpowering. That is why other sentient beings and myself are drowning in the river of delusion, wandering along the evil paths from time immemorial. The wheel of birth and death is spinning without end; how can I find a way to rescue myself and others in a safe, sure manner?”

“There is but one solution: it is to seek rebirth in the Pure Land, draw close to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and, relying on the supremely auspicious environment of that realm, engage in cultivation and attain the Tolerance of Non-Birth. Only then can I enter the evil world to rescue sentient beings.”

The Treatise on Rebirth states:

“To develop the Bodhi Mind is precisely to seek Buddhahood; to seek Buddhahood is to develop the Mind of rescuing sentient beings; and the Mind of rescuing sentient beings is none other than the Mind that gathers in all beings and helps them achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.”

Moreover, to ensure rebirth, we should perfect two practices: abandoning the three things that hinder enlightenment and abiding by the three things that foster enlightenment.

What are the three things that hinder enlightenment?

First, the Mind of seeking our own peace and happiness, ego-grasping and attachment to our own bodies. The practitioner should follow the path of wisdom and leave all such thoughts far behind.

Second, the Mind of abandoning and failing to rescue sentient beings from suffering. The practitioner should follow the path of compassion and leave all such thoughts far behind.

Third, the Mind of exclusively seeking respect and offerings, without seeking ways to benefit sentient beings and bring them peace and happiness. The practitioner should follow the path of expedients and leave all such thoughts far behind.

Once he has abandoned these three hindrances, the practitioner will obtain the three things that foster enlightenment. They are:

First, the “undefiled Pure Mind” of not seeking personal happiness. That is, enlightenment is the state of undefiled purity. If we seek after personal pleasure, body and Mind are defiled and obstruct the path of enlightenment. Therefore, the undefiled Pure Mind is called consonant with enlightenment.

Second, the “Pure Mind at peace”, rescuing all sentient beings from suffering. This is because Bodhi is the undefiled Pure Mind which gives peace and happiness to sentient beings. If we are not rescuing sentient beings and helping them to escape the sufferings of Birth and Death, we are going counter to the Bodhi path. Therefore, a Mind focussed on saving others, bringing them peace and happiness, is called consonant with enlightenment.



Third, a “blissful, Pure Mind”, seeking to help sentient beings achieve Great Nirvana. Because Great Nirvana is the ultimate, eternally blissful realm, if we do not help sentient beings to achieve it, we obstruct the Bodhi path. Hence, the Mind which seeks to help sentient beings attain eternal bliss is called consonant with enlightenment.

How can we abandon the things that hinder enlightenment and abide by the things that foster enlightenment? – It is precisely by seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land, remaining constantly near the Buddhas and cultivating the Dharma until Tolerance of Non-Birth is reached. At that point, we may sail the boat of great vows at will, enter the sea of Birth and Death and rescue sentient beings with wisdom and compassion, “adapting to conditions but fundamentally unchanging”, free and unimpeded. This ends our discussion of the goal of rebirth.

2) The cultivator should next contemplate the wholesome characteristics of the Pure Land and the auspicious features of Amitabha Buddha.

Auspicious features:

Amitabha Buddha possesses a resplendent, golden Reward Body, replete with 84,000 major characteristics, each characteristic having 84,000 minor auspicious signs, each sign beaming 84,000 rays of light which illuminate the entire Dharma Realm and gather in those sentient beings who recite the Buddha’s name (Ninth Visualization in the Meditation Sutra).

Wholesome characteristics:

The Western Pure Land is adorned with seven treasures, as explained in the Pure Land sutras.

In addition, when practicing charity, keeping the precepts and performing all kinds of good deeds, Pure Land practitioners should always dedicate the merits toward rebirth in the Pure Land for themselves and all other sentient beings.

If the practitioner can cultivate joyfulness in vows, as set out in Section B, he will develop a Mind of hope and longing for the Pure Land and achieve rebirth without fail. This is what is meant by vowing to rescue oneself and others.